

30 YEARS OF THE ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT

BLACK-FOOTED FERRET

Black-footed ferrets, once thought to be extinct, are slowly resurging in the wild. This nocturnal carnivore has inhabited the mid-continent grasslands of North America for the past 30,000 years. The black-footed ferret remains a highly endangered species that would likely be extinct without the Endangered Species Act.

HISTORY OF ENDANGERMENT

The black-footed ferret's fate is inextricably linked with that of its primary food source and habitat provider, the prairie dog. Prairie dogs provide 90 percent of the ferret's diet, and ferrets cannot survive in the wild outside of prairie dog colonies. Mistakenly thought to be a pest on rangeland, prairie dogs have been the target of an intensive and highly effective eradication program coordinated by the federal government. The ferret is a notable victim of the relentless campaign.

With only one known wild population, the black-footed ferret was listed under the Endangered Species Preservation Act of 1966. However, that law failed to provide the ferret with urgently needed habitat protection. In 1971, a captive population was taken from the sole known ferret site in South Dakota. After several years of unsuccessful breeding attempts, the last captive ferret died in 1979, and no ferrets were known to exist in the wild. Two years later, ferrets were found living among a white-tailed prairie dog population in Meeteetse, Wyoming. When this wild population began to plummet from disease, the remaining 18 ferrets were captured in hopes of preventing the species from disappearing altogether.

ROAD TO RECOVERY

The ferret was listed as endangered in 1974. While declines in prairie dog habitat still occurred after the ferret's listing, its formal endangered status helped direct resources toward a recovery plan intended to restore ferrets across ten lo-

cations within their historic range. A significant obstacle to ferret recovery is the lack of large enough prairie dog complexes (groups of prairie dog colonies in close proximity to each other). Sylvatic plague has severely reduced one of the few remaining large complexes located on Thunder Basin National Grassland. Coal-bed methane development and continued extermination of prairie dogs degrades remaining ferret habitat.

CONSERVATION TODAY

Within the United States, ferrets have been reintroduced into prairie dog habitat on federal and tribal lands throughout the west and southwest. Ferrets were also introduced into the largest remaining prairie dog complex in Chihuahua, Mexico. At several sites, ferrets are making a comeback, but recovery is faltering in most of the areas where ferrets have been reintroduced. There is only one self-sustaining population of ferrets in the wild, located at Buffalo Gap National Grassland in South Dakota.



ECOLOGICAL VALUE

In addition to its inherent value as a native wildlife species, the black-footed ferret is an umbrella species for prairie dog ecosystems. A self-sustaining population of ferrets requires a 10,000-acre prairie dog complex. This large amount of prairie dog acreage can provide habitat for other species as well, including the mountain plover, swift fox, burrowing owl, and ferruginous hawk, and more than 100 other wildlife species that benefit from grassland habitat.

OUTLOOK FOR THE FUTURE

With increasing populations of reintroduced ferrets at some sites, there is cause for optimism. Full enforcement of Endangered Species Act protections, including critical habitat designation, which the ferret lacks, would help ensure the recovery of this unique carnivore.

Black-footed ferret recovery rests on the protection of its lifeline—the prairie dog. This requires a shift in how federal and state governments and private parties regard the prairie dog ecosystem. Prairie dog shooting is still at an all time high in many areas, and urban sprawl is claiming many high-density prairie dog populations. Scientists have predicted “wave of secondary extinctions” which would include the black-footed ferret unless prairie dog population declines are halted.

As we celebrate the bicentennial of the Lewis and Clark exploration of the west—the explorers remarked about the extraordinary prairie dog ecosystem and a Great Plains teeming with wildlife—the fate of a charismatic member of that ecosystem, the black-footed ferret, hangs in the balance.

